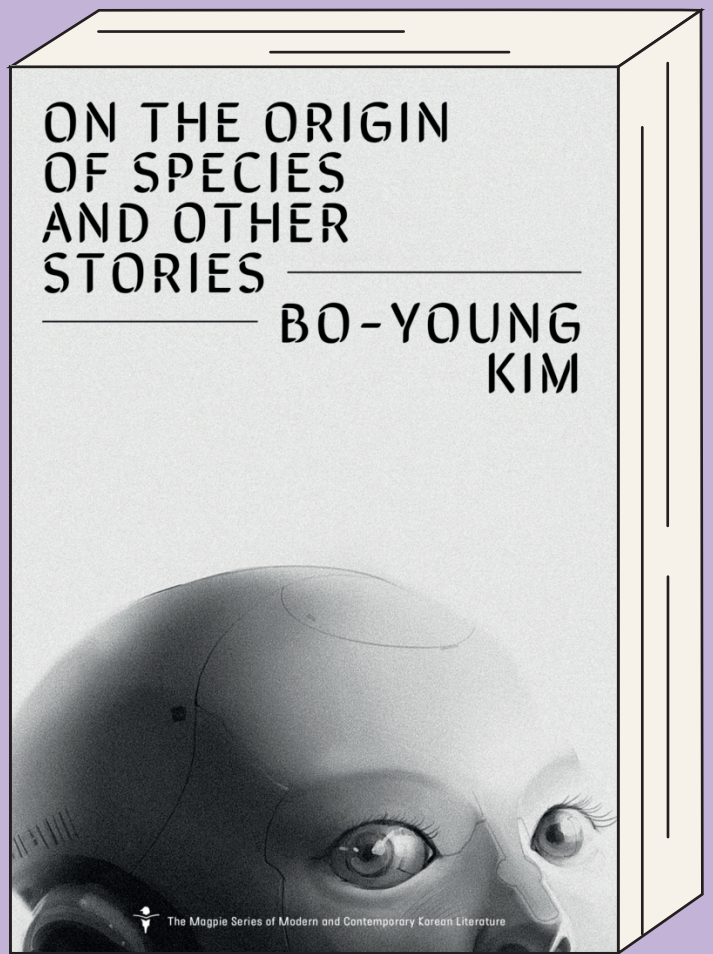


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO BO-YOUNG KIM'S

ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES



➤ About the Author

Bo-Young Kim, one of South Korea's most distinctive and accomplished Science Fiction authors, won the inaugural Korean Science & Technology Creative Writing Award with her first published novella in 2004 and has gone on to win the annual South Korean SF novel three times. In addition to writing, she regularly serves as a lecturer, juror, and editor of SF anthologies, and served as a consultant to the Bong Jun-ho film *Snowpiercer*. In addition to this short story collection, her published book of stories to be translated into English language edition, she also has novellas forthcoming from HarperCollins. She lives in Gangwon Province, South Korea with her family.

➤ Synopsis

Straddling science fiction, fantasy, and myth, the writings of award-winning author Bo-Young Kim has garnered a cult following in South Korea, where she is widely acknowledged as a pioneer and inspiration. *On the Origin of Species* makes available for the first time in English some of Kim's most acclaimed stories as well as an essay on science fiction. Her strikingly original, thought-provoking work teems with human and non-human beings, all of whom are striving to maintain their individuality through evolution, whether biologically, technologically, or socially. Kim's distinctive literature of ideas offers some of the most rigorous and surprisingly poignant reflections on posthuman existence being written today.

↘ HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE ↙

The inventive worlds and visions of humanity’s future that fill Bo-Young Kim’s stories make *On the Origin of Species* an excellent choice for middle school, high school, or college student work in courses examining Asian literature and experiences, science fiction, literature in translation, or the complex relationships between humanity, society, and science. The short story format makes the lessons and themes easily accessible, and provides an exciting opportunity to take a deep dive into literary and cultural analysis that can challenge students’ thinking. Included in this teaching guide are questions, themes, quotes, and additional resources intended to help educators more clearly frame their lessons when discussing the stories, assigning classwork or homework, and facilitating engagement and understanding.

➤ STORY OVERVIEWS ✧ & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

On the Origin of Species is divided into 8 separate stories, each with their own characters and themes. The following is a synopsis and overview of each story, with touchpoints for analysis by theme and general discussion/analysis.

“A BRIEF REFLECTION ON BREASTS”

In this essay, Kim uses society’s reaction to and analysis of breasts to discuss Science Fiction (SF) work, dissecting how society assigns meanings to people and works based on what are perceived to be all-encompassing characteristics, such as breasts on a woman or science in short stories.

➤ Themes

- **Societal Norms**

- “Over time, though, this theory of breasts veers off in a new direction. A pro-breast element emerges. Its members can’t stop praising how beautiful, how mystical, how fully blessed breasts are. They proclaim that all that matters in a woman are her breasts, that a woman is her breasts.” (5)

- “A man who lacks adequate exposure to women might think that whatever a woman does is “because she’s female,” especially if her femaleness is what he notices the most about her.” (10)

- **Science**

- “If we see a person in the distance and they seem to have breasts, we hastily assume that they must be a woman. Science seems to occupy a similar position in SF.” (9)

- “Think about how ancient, organic, and universal love is in human history. Science is no different. In the beginning was love—and science.” (11)

➤ Discussion Questions

- How does “A Brief Reflection on Breasts” work as both an introduction to the book and a standalone story?
- How is gender defined in this essay? How does this definition change over time?
- How is the speaker in this story situated within the history of gender and science fiction that they present in the story? Do they contribute to the dominant narratives they discuss or defy them?

“SCRIPTER”

In an immersive, though outdated, video game, an admin arrives to convince a hunter, the game’s last remaining player, to quit so that the server can be shut down. The admin is shocked to find that the hunter lives with a woman who also appears to be a human player, despite there being on records of her logging on. The two players try to prove their humanity to the admin, who is determined to destroy the game, and the woman, to force the hunter to leave. As the world crumbles around them, all three characters wrestle with the nature of reality and the question of their own humanity.

🦋 Themes

• Humanity

- “Though none may know the days of your life and no trace of those days remain, the moment of your being will shine as brilliantly as the rays of the sun, the wind, and the clouds that likewise linger for a moment before vanishing.” (35).
- “Someone devoted their life to this lie. They toiled over each and every sentence, because they wanted me to appear human. I’m the only one they shared their lonely, meaningless life with, and I’m the only proof that they ever existed. Therefore, I have to guard this lie until the moment I cease to exist” (61).
- “I just wanted to know whether someone who couldn’t prove they were human could still be accepted as human.” (54).

• Perspective

- “But what I cannot accept is that this world is a lie, a dream, a mirage. No one will ever convince me of that.” (39).
- “He may be fearless in here, but out there he’s nothing. He’ll be absolutely helpless against a giant corporation. That’s why he refuses to leave.” (57).
- “You hear whatever you want to hear, so you always get the answer you’re looking for. You invent conversations from monologues you’re having with yourself. You interpret motives in things that have no motive, see logic where there is no logic. You even see countless fragments of emotions in the blank tablet that is his face. All the while failing to recognize that those emotions are your own.” (58).

🦋 Discussion Questions

- What is the difference between a human and an AI? Which characters do you think were human?
- Why did the admin believe that the hunter was a human and the woman was an AI?
- How do the characters in this story know that their own world is real? Can their points of view be proven correct or incorrect by the other characters?

“BETWEEN ZERO AND ONE”

This story follows Mrs. Kim, a mother reflecting on her daughter Soo-ae’s suicide, interwoven with an anonymous narrator’s musings on time travel and the endless possibilities that the future holds. Mrs. Kim flashes back to her past interactions with other mothers, who all placed intense educational pressure on their children in order to maintain their family’s reputation, and considers how it affected her relationship with Soo-ae. In one of these flashbacks, she meets her supposedly crazy neighbor, a woman she calls Thick Glasses. Though Thick Glasses’s rants about time travel and the probability-based science of the future confound Mrs. Kim, they are the key to understanding Soo-ae’s true fate.

🔗 Themes

• Societal Norms

- “Mrs. Kim sometimes felt as though children were being driven to their ruin while moms like her stood around chanting their mantra: “Aren’t kids all the same? My kid does that, too.”” (82)
- “Words are merely symbols that represent average values, but adults always try to fit the world into a few words. They don’t even recognize the many shades of black and white.” (92)
- “We only see what we have witnessed, and we only know what we have seen. And yet people talk with such confidence, as if they have witnessed every aspect of the world.” (74)

🔗 Discussion Questions

- How does time travel exist in our world, according to this story? What are the negative effects of this time travel?
- How do you see pressure for success in your own life? Do you or people around you resist this pressure, like the students in the story?
- Why do Mrs. Kim and the other parents treat their children so harshly, according to each of the characters?

“AN EVOLUTIONARY MYTH”

This story takes place in a kingdom where lifeforms can evolve in a matter of months based on their conditions. When his power-hungry uncle usurps the throne, the land’s young prince must rapidly develop different characteristics to avoid death. The night an assassin comes to murder him, the prince escapes the palace with the sacrifice of one of his servants. In following years, he continues to change into different creatures to survive in the wild amid a devastating drought. Though he avoids the world, people around him continue to suffer at the hands of his murderous uncle, who transforms into a monstrous form thanks to his greed and cruelty. Eventually, the prince settles into a giant, snake-like form at the bottom of a lake, where he begins to attract worshippers. The hope he gives his people alerts his uncle, who draws the prince into a conflict that pushes him towards his final evolution.

🦋 Themes

• Humanity

- “The cells of our bodies continue to be born and to die at every instant, and the blood in our veins is continually being created and disappearing; when old cells die, new ones appear to fill the gaps left behind, and soon enough, not a single original cell remains. One truly becomes completely different not only in mind, but also in body. All creatures, whether they wish it or no, die and are reborn several times during their lives.” (104)
- ““What does original form mean, anyway? Ought every creature to spend its whole life as a newborn infant?” the tiger rejoined. ‘You say you were born in human form, but your ancestors were once bears and tigers, snakes and fishes, birds and plants. Now you’re fighting to hang onto this human shape, but ultimately you’ll realize the effort is pointless. What’s so precious about dying in the same form you were born into?’” (108)
- “Nature chooses its survivors without considering good or evil or what is superior or inferior. Even the human form is just one of many means of survival made available by nature.” (109)

• Class

- “Those aristocrats who pass their days comfortably in their rooms, living off taxes and stipends garnered from the people, lose their human forms the quickest.” (104)

🦋 Discussion Questions

- Do the characters in this story retain any humanity as they switch forms? How can this humanity be defined, if not by body?
- In what ways is this story a myth? What elements make it similar to other myths?
- Why do the eunuch, the samu, and the worshippers by the lake all sacrifice themselves for the prince? What does this say about his relationship to the throne and the people?
- If you lived in this world, what shape would you take and why?

“LAST OF THE WOLVES”

In an Earth where humans are subservient to dragons, whose radically different senses prevent them from knowing the extent of humans’ intelligence, a human pet called Albi escapes their home and seeks out the non-pet humans who live on the streets. Albi fights and bluffs their way to an abandoned train station where they hope to find a wolf, one of the fabled free humans who fight against the dragons. However, betraying their owner is more difficult than Albi once thought.

🦋 Themes

• Perspective

- “You’re unhappy because your master has no way of knowing that you possess intelligence and wisdom and, more than that, a heart and soul. None of them do.” (143)
- “The image of me that they see is completely different from what I see in the mirror, and they hear a voice coming from me that I cannot hear myself.” (144)
- “He does not know that his house is filled with pictures, that I’ve filled his walls with paintings of fiery sunsets, of indigo night skies. He thinks that all I do is leave my scent and mark my territory. He does not even know that I’ve painted his portrait on the front door. Nor does he know that his own body glows jade green. Or that his eyes are also jade green.” (146)

• Humanity

- “Do not let this song end. Do not shirk your duty to transmit this song to the next generations.” (132)
- “But what does an instinct for building a home prove? Beavers build dams, and bees and ants build complex structures. Furthermore, whales and birds sing songs that contain both verses and choruses, and insects form perfect communal societies complete with a ruling class, a military class, and a laboring class. The weird things we humans do are no proof of intellect.” (135).

🦋 Discussion Questions

- How does this story invert the relationship between owners and pets that we see in our everyday lives? Do you relate to the dragons or the humans in this story?
- How does Albi’s relationship to the dragons differ from the street cats that they encounter? What sets these humans apart?
- How do different species define intelligence in this story? Which one has the correct definition of intelligence?



“ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES”

This story is set in a time much different than our own, when Earth is inhabited by robots who know nothing of humanity or natural life. Kay, a graduate student in chemistry and a bipedal robot, meets Cecil, a fellow bipedal robot who is looked down upon for their strange, human-like appearance. Cecil convinces Kay to study organic biology, a new field of science that defies robot society by considering organic matter alive, stating that Kay’s own thesis inspired their work. After joining the lab, Kay struggles to prove their findings to skeptical robots, especially since the fragile plant specimens die quickly in their harsh environment. Kay must defy all assumptions of robot society to succeed in their research, but the implications of their discoveries remain unknown.

🦋 Themes

• Religion

- “What does this servility that seems to have been stamped onto the roots of the robot mind, this fantasy of submission, this romanticization of despots and the almighty have to do with maintaining our race?” (153)
- “How does the idea of being created give a robot peace of mind? Is it scary to think that we sprang into being on our own? We like to imagine that there is some unimaginably almighty being up on some high peak who watches over us and controls us, that we are slaves to this being. And that’s supposed to bring us happiness?” (154)
- “Our subconscious contains the endless wisdom that the gods bestowed upon us. If we could clear our minds and look deep into our subconscious, we would be able to divine all kinds of truths.” (215)

• Science

- “Trusting common sense was like wearing blinders. Even common sense, after all, was nothing more than hypotheses based on inductive reasoning.” (203)
- “Modern science is so preoccupied with expanding existing hypotheses that it never pays attention to why and how those hypotheses were first posited.” (206)
- “Where are we going with this? Is it wise for us to probe so deeply into the mysteries of creation? Have we started something we shouldn’t have?” (217)

• Class

- “Many scholars refused to acknowledge that 2000s were excluded from educational and cultural opportunities in this way from the moment they were born, instead attributing their poor achievement to the untested claim that they had the lowest IQs of all of the above-two-digit robots.” (157)
- “For what else is the image of God as drawn by a robot’s paltry imagination than a synthesis of features characterizing the world’s privileged class?” (149)

- **Perspective**

- “If we create creatures that walk on dry land, we can keep them on display in terrariums. If it goes really well, we might even be able to use them as toys” (219)
- “Factories send ash and debris into the air to feed the black cloud, emitting carbon dioxide to maintain the planet’s temperature and releasing spent oil and other industrial wastes over the earth’s ice cover to prevent it from evaporating and raining down on us. We must protect our beautiful environment. If we don’t, it will be the end of our species.” (170)

✎ Discussion Questions

- Where does the robots’ religion come from? What purpose does it serve in their society?
- How does this story critique scientific study and academia? What attitudes hold the researchers back from furthering their findings?
- How does the robot society reflect and counter human society? What factors make their society distinct?



“STARS SHINE IN EARTH’S SKY”

This story, framed by a letter from a sister to her brother, details the sister’s strange illness, where she must fall unconscious for hours every day, seemingly without reason. She struggles with being perceived as strange and unhealthy by others in society who do not have this need, although she has come to terms with the fact that her illness is a natural and integral part of who she is. She relates her struggle to the cryptic message “Stars shine in Earth’s sky,” which has been sent across space to her planet. Her reflections on Earth’s people help her explain that her condition may not be a condition at all, but simply a way of being.

🔗 Themes

- Perspective

- “From where I stand, “beating” what we have looks a lot like turning ourselves into someone we’re not. Not that this matters to those who aren’t like us, since it doesn’t mean losing one of their own. But for me, it would mean abandoning myself. Throwing away everything that is truly me.” (230)
- “You, too, would be astounded to discover that this world of darkness, which seems so buried in silence and solitude, in fact thrums with life and energy.” (231)
- “Perhaps you take it for granted that you live in a world populated by people who are like you, but the very same world appears completely different to people like me. For us, there are no teachers and no students, no colleagues, nowhere to call our own. We must spend our lives teaching ourselves, studying alone, and working to craft a system and an environment to accommodate our needs—all the while fending off those who never tire of saying, ‘You can beat this.’” (232)
- “Having always lived under a perpetually luminous sky, it had never occurred to us that anyone else’s sky could be otherwise.” (236)

🔗 Discussion Questions

- Does this story change, challenge, or affirm the ways in which you understand sickness or illness in society?
- What does it mean for a behavior or action to be considered normal or deviant?

“ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES— AND WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED THEREAFTER”

In an Earth inhabited only by robots, a bird robot seeks out Kay, a former researcher in the controversial field of organic biology, which argues that organic matter is alive. The bird urges Kay to investigate their old lab, as the bird’s partner and everyone else who has visited the lab have abandoned their lives to work there. Kay returns to the lab to find it massively expanded and overtaken by organic life, even though the conditions are deadly to robots. Kay’s old partner, Cecil, reveals the secret of the lab’s happiness: human children, who immediately inspire a deeply programmed reverence in the robots as their gods and creators. Kay finds themselves torn between awe and fear, suddenly finding themselves with the entire future of robot kind in their hands.

🔗 Themes

• Religion

- ““Are you suggesting that they’re our God?” / “That depends on what you call God. If God is the heart of virtue, the supreme value, the absolute, the beginning and the end, the source of life, that which is deserving of our total adoration and submission, then yes, that name suits them perfectly. They gave us new life and showed us the truth.”” (286)
- “What are they, really? Those beings that look like robots but are not robots. That are so very vulnerable and yet so very transcendent. Are they god’s way of warning robots that pride goes before the fall?” (299)
- “We’ve created a species with extraordinary mental facilities, who can make us grovel at their feet, who we can’t resist. They’ll take over the world. And all because no robot would dare harm so much as a single finger of theirs” (286)
- “Are our lives chained to an algorithm that God implemented, or are we powered by our own free will?” (243)

🔗 Discussion Questions

- If we understand the organic organisms as representative of humans, what might this story suggest about the relationship between humans and robots, and what our future trajectory might be?
- What do you think of the reverence and willful subservience that seems to overtake most robots as soon as they see one of the organisms? Why do you think they have that reaction? Why was Kay different?
- Was Kay right to kill the organisms? Why or why not? If he had let them live, what do you think might have happened after?
- Does this story shift your own perspective of human origins and/or the narratives we tell about ourselves and others?
- What do you make of the themes of religion, reverence, and worship woven throughout the story? How do these ideas influence, challenge, support, or complicate your understanding? Are there connections you can draw from these themes to current society?

↘ BIG PICTURE QUESTIONS ↙ (Across the Whole Book)

- Do you notice any specific themes or ideas that tie all of the stories together? Or, conversely, is there anything that stands out or makes a particular story distinct from the others?
- Which story was most interesting to you, and why?
- How do these stories use science fiction to make commentary about our world? What themes and techniques are utilized across the stories?

↘ THEMES ↙

The following list defines and contextualizes some of the major themes present in *On the Origin of Species*. Many of these themes also share similarities and overlap with each other, and are not mutually exclusive - each of the stories can have elements of a number of different themes.

↘ Science

As works of science fiction, Kim's stories explore the consequences, limits, and possibilities of scientific discovery. Rather than being a neutral source of facts, science is a deeply human discipline, defined and created by people who impart their biases onto their work. The stories in *On the Origin of Species* explore both the struggle to progress science into truly novel territories and the dangers of scientific discoveries that develop beyond our control. Some stories reimagine the laws of the universe, creating an alternate science that governs a fantastical world. Through each story, science is a vehicle to examine humanity.

↘ Societal Norms

The pressures and expectations of those in one's community are impossible to ignore. These societal norms force people into uncomfortable situations, preventing them from living as they please. In *On the Origin of Species*, pressure to conform to these norms come from those in power, peers, and family members. Kim's stories allow readers to consider how the world around them contributes to their behavior, and hopefully understand how to stop harmful societal norms.

↘ Humanity

What does it mean to be human? The stories of *On the Origin of Species* often ask this question. Whether they are humans, robots, or something in between, the characters that fill this book struggle to hold on to and understand the things that define humanity. By writing science fiction that reimagine the rules of our world, Kim challenges readers to think differently about what humanity truly means, and whether it can exist even without the typical form of a human body.

↘ Perspective

On the Origin of Species uses the genre of science fiction to alter the reader's perspective and prompt new considerations of what were once assumed truths. Whether robots rule the planet, humans are kept as pets, or Earth is a bizarre and distant world, each story's setting inverts aspects of our everyday lives. By examining familiar concepts from these new perspectives, both characters and readers can overcome the notion of common sense, unlocking a new way to think about the world.

↘ Class

Beneath the surface of these fantastical stories runs a current of class difference and discrimination that connects each narrative to our world. Some power struggles stem from despotic leaders, while others map inequality between races onto robotic bodies. The presence of wealth and power imbalances in these stories reveal similar inequities in real life, and help us to consider how and why these inequities exist.

↘ Religion

Drawing influences from real world religions, Kim incorporates organized religions and theological questioning into her stories. Characters in these stories grapple with the concept of god, questioning whether or not their actions and worlds can be their own when there is a higher power at play. Science is used to play god and create life, which can in turn take on a god-like form. The inclusion of religious themes makes readers question the nature of their existence and where belief comes from.

↘ RECOMMENDED FOR THESE CLASSES ↙

On the Origin of Species is ideal for a wide range of classes because of its use of science fiction to explore humanity, class, society, and reality. It is particularly relevant to middle school, high school, and college level literature classes examining genres such as science fiction and fantasy, short stories, and literature in translation.

↘ ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ↙

The following resource list, though by no means exhaustive, is intended to provide complementary articles, media, and other knowledge sources that help situate *On the Origin of Species* within the larger topics of Korean culture, science fiction, and literature in translation.

↘ KOREAN CULTURE

- The All-Work, No-Play Culture Of South Korean Education
- Religion in Korea

↘ KOREAN SCIENCE FICTION

- Science Fiction's Golden Age in Korea?
- *Readymade Bodhisattva: The Kaya Anthology of South Korean Science Fiction*, edited by Sunyoung
- Park and Sang Joon Park
- *Snowpiercer* - a film by Bong Jun-ho

↘ LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

- The Subtle Art of Translating Foreign Fiction
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